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Man of Destiny



FOR PRIVATE POPPOLI, THE WAR ENDED IN SEPTEMBER 1943 WHEN ITALY SURRENDERED. AFTER THAT, IT WAS JUST A MATTER OF GETTING HOME. BUT HOME FOR PRIVATE POPPOLI, WAS THREE HUNDRED MILES AND A LOAD OF TROUBLE AWAY

*Chapter 1.***HOMEWARD BOUND**

SEPTEMBER 8, 1943, WAS THE DAY ON WHICH THE TIDE OF WAR WASHED UP TO THE BEACHES OF ITALY. ONE OF THE EIGHTH ARMY LANDINGS WAS AT CHIARO IN CALABRIA .



INTO THE BULLET-LASHED SURF SPLASHED THE BRITISH INVADERS. BEHIND FIXED BAYONETS, THEY WADED FORWARD.



IT WAS THE GERMAN WEHRMACHT, HURRIEDLY FLUNG INTO POSITION, WHICH DISPUTED THE BRITISH LANDING. THE MEN ON BOTH SIDES WERE VETERANS. THEY FOUGHT VICIOUSLY...



FOR THREE YEARS THE ITALIANS, PRODDED BY THEIR FASCIST LEADERS, HAD WAGED TEPID WAR ON THE GERMAN SIDE. NOW THE BATTLE WAS ON THEIR OWN DOORSTEP AND THEY SWEATED BETWEEN TWO FIRES...



Man Of Destiny

TWO WEEKS BEFORE THE BRITISH INVASION, THE ITALIAN DICTATOR MUSSOLINI HAD BEEN DEPOSED BY HIS OWN PEOPLE. ALREADY A SURRENDER HAD BEEN ARRANGED ...

SEE THAT WHACKING BIG BARRACKS BACK OF THE TOWN, SIR? GUNS ARE LOBBING A SALVO ON TO IT ... SHOULD KEEP THE EYTIES QUIET!

ONE SALVO ONLY, NUMBER ONE ... WE DON'T WANT THE EYTIES TO CHANGE THEIR MINDS!

THE OFFICIAL ORDER TO LAY DOWN THEIR ARMS REACHED THE GARRISON OF THE ITALIAN BARRACKS AT THE SAME TIME AS THE SALVO FROM THE BRITISH WARSHIP ...

SAPRISTI! THE ENEMY BOMBARDS US! FOR THIS I WILL NOT STAND!

CAPITANO!
CAPITANO!
SPLENDID NEWS!

THE NEWS, AND HIS MEN'S
DELIGHTED RECEPTION OF
IT, DISGUSTED CAPITANO
MASTRIANO . . .

ON THE WIRELESS, CAPITANO...
THE WAR IS OVER FOR US! THE
MARSHAL ORDERS US TO LAY
DOWN OUR ARMS!

MIRACOLOSO!

PAH! BUT FOR THIS I WOULD
HAVE BUNDLED THE IMPERTINENT
INGLESE BACK INTO THE SEA!
IT IS LUCKY FOR THEM.

A STRAY SHELL BLEW HOT AIR INTO
THE WATCH TOWER. THE BELLIGERENT
CAPITANO BEAT A STRATEGIC
RETREAT . . .

HOWEVER, IT IS A
SOLDIER'S DUTY TO OBEY
ORDERS! STAY HERE, MEN!
I SHALL GO BELOW TO . . .
TO PUT MY PAPERS
IN ORDER!

Man Of Destiny

FOR THREE YEARS OF THE MOST SAVAGE WAR IN HISTORY, THE QUIETEST SPOT IN THE QUIET BACKWATER OF SUNNY CHIARO HAD BEEN CAPITANO MASTRIANO'S REGIMENTAL OFFICE . . .

ONE MOMENT, CAPITANO . . .
BOOTS, PAIRS OF, THREE THOUSAND
... BRUSHES, BOOT, THREE THOUSAND
AND THREE ... BRACES, SEVEN
HUNDRED AND
TWO ...

NOV 8
1943

AH, POPPOLI! STILL
AT YOUR POST! AT LEAST
ONE OF MY SOLDIERS SHOWS
A SELFLESS DEVOTION
TO DUTY!

IT WAS THERE, WITH A PEN AND A
RUBBER STAMP, THAT PRIVATE
POPPOLI HAD FOUGHT HIS WAR ...

NOISY CHAPS, THE GERMANS,
CAPITANO. I SUPPOSE THEY'RE
HOLDING MANOEUVRES ON THE
BEACH AGAIN. SUCH BANGS ...

BANGS, PRIVATE POPPOLI?
YOU HAVE NOT HEARD? FOR US
THE WAR IS OVER. ITALY HAS
SURRENDERED AND HER WARRIORS
MUST LAY DOWN THEIR ARMS ...

PRIVATE POPPOLI DID NOT LAY DOWN HIS ARMS. HE CLIPPED THEM IN HIS POCKET . . .

YOU DON'T SAY, CAPITANO . . .
SO THE WAR IS OVER . . . WELL,
WELL, WELL . . .



PRIVATE POPPOLI STOOD UP BUSILY . . .

POPPOLI . . . WHAT
ARE YOU DOING?



TIDYING UP, CAPITANO.
I'LL BET MY DESK IN THE TOWN HALL
AT CASTELMONTE IS UNTIDY. MARRIAGES,
DEATHS AND BIRTHS, THAT WAS ME.
THREE YEARS IS A LONG TIME. I'LL BET
THEY'LL BE GLAD WHEN I GET BACK . . .

PRIVATE POPPOLI PICKED UP HIS ATTACHE CASE . . .

POPPOLI . . . WHAT
ARE YOU PACKING?

JUST A SLICE OF
SALAMI, CAPITANO, AND A BIT OF
COLD MACARONI AND A COUPLE OF
GHERKINS. WALKING MAKES A
CHAP HUNGRY. WELL . . .
I THINK THAT'S ALL . . .



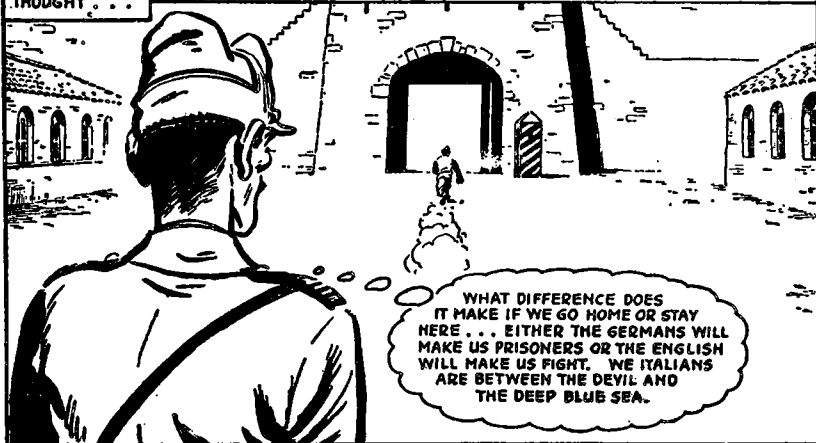
HIS CAP ON HIS HEAD, HIS ATTACHE CASE IN HIS HAND, PRIVATE POPPOLI STARTED FOR THE DOOR . . .

HOME, CAPITANO!
WHERE ELSE? THE
WAR IS OVER, YOU
SAID SO
YOURSELF . . .

POPPOLI . . .
WHERE ARE YOU
GOING?



SO PRIVATE POPPOLI WALKED OUT OF THE BARRACKS, OUT OF CHIARO, OUT OF THE WAR. OR SO HE THOUGHT . . .



PRIVATE POPPOLI, TROTTING NORTHWARDS, DID NOT THINK ABOUT DEVILS OR DEEP BLUE SEAS. HE THOUGHT HAPPILY ABOUT CASTELMONTE. HE THOUGHT ABOUT HIS DESK IN THE TOWN HALL THERE.



FINALLY HE THOUGHT ABOUT SALAMI. HE HAD COVERED FIVE MILES AND HE HAD TWO HUNDRED AND NINETY FIVE MILES TO GO, BUT THE SUN WAS HOT AND HE WAS HUNGRY . . .

AH . . . ONE OF THOSE LITTLE HILLOCKS WILL DO! SUCH A LOVELY DAY FOR EATING IN THE OPEN. I MUST SAY, PEACE IS VERY NICE . . .



Man Of Destiny

HE WAS EATING A GHERKIN, HIS BACK AGAINST THE HILLOCK, WHEN A CLOUD OF DUST CAME BOWLING ALONG THE ROAD FROM CHIARO. HE WATCHED IT APPROACH WITHOUT ALARM . . .



THE VEHICLES WERE ACTUALLY BRITISH JEEPS OF THE SPECIAL AIR SERVICE. THEY HAD BEACHED NORTH OF THE MAIN LANDINGS AT CHIARO AND WERE PROBING THE GERMAN DEFENCES INLAND . . .



PRIVATE POPPOLI DID LOOK PEACEFUL. HE FELT PEACEFUL. BUT IT WAS THE LAST TIME HE WOULD FIND ANY PEACE FOR EIGHT MONTHS ON THE LONG ROAD HOME.

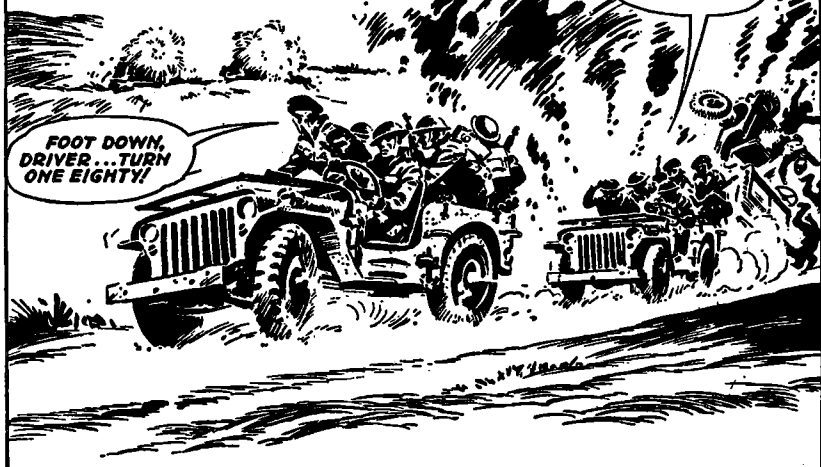


THE HILLOCK BY WHICH PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD EATEN HIS LUNCH WAS THE TURRET OF A CUNNINGLY-CAMOUFLAGED GERMAN PANTHER TANK. THE 'TREE TRUNK' WAS ITS GUN. THE GUN WENT OFF VERY LOUDLY BESIDE PRIVATE POPPOLI'S EAR



Man Of Destiny

THE AMBUSH HAD BEEN NEATLY STAGED. IT WAS NOT ONLY PRIVATE POPPOLI WHO HAD BEEN FOOLED BY THE CAMOUFLAGED TANKS.



TWO JEEPS HAD BEEN HIT. THE OTHER TWO MADE A FAST U-TURN WHICH TOOK THE GERMAN GUNNERS BY SURPRISE. THEY ACCELERATED BACK ALONG THE ROAD, TOMMY GUNS SPITTING DEFIANCE . . .



IN ALL HIS THREE YEARS OF WAR, THE LOUDEST NOISE PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD HEARD WAS THE SCRATCHING OF HIS PEN. NOW ALL HELL WAS HUMMING ABOUT HIS EARS



THE STEEL HATCH OF THE NEAREST PANTHER CLANGED OPEN AS THE TWO BRITISH JEEPS WITHDREW AT HIGH SPEED. A SQUARE BLOND HEAD APPEARED IN THE TURRET



MAJOR KURT BERG, OF THE SIXTH PANZER DIVISION, WAS IN A GOOD HUMOUR. HIS VOICE WAS AS SOFT AS A BLUNT STEEL FILE . . .

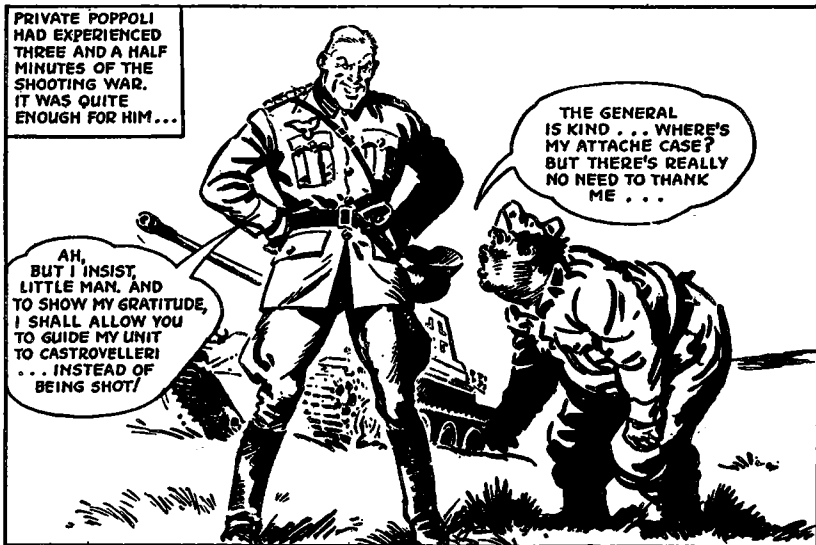
SO! THE ITALIAN WHO ACTED AS OUR DECOY! GET UP, LITTLE MAN. I WISH TO THANK YOU!



PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD EXPERIENCED THREE AND A HALF MINUTES OF THE SHOOTING WAR. IT WAS QUITE ENOUGH FOR HIM...

AH, BUT I INSIST, LITTLE MAN. AND TO SHOW MY GRATITUDE, I SHALL ALLOW YOU TO GUIDE MY UNIT TO CASTROVELLERI... INSTEAD OF BEING SHOT!

THE GENERAL IS KIND... WHERE'S MY ATTACHE CASE? BUT THERE'S REALLY NO NEED TO THANK ME...

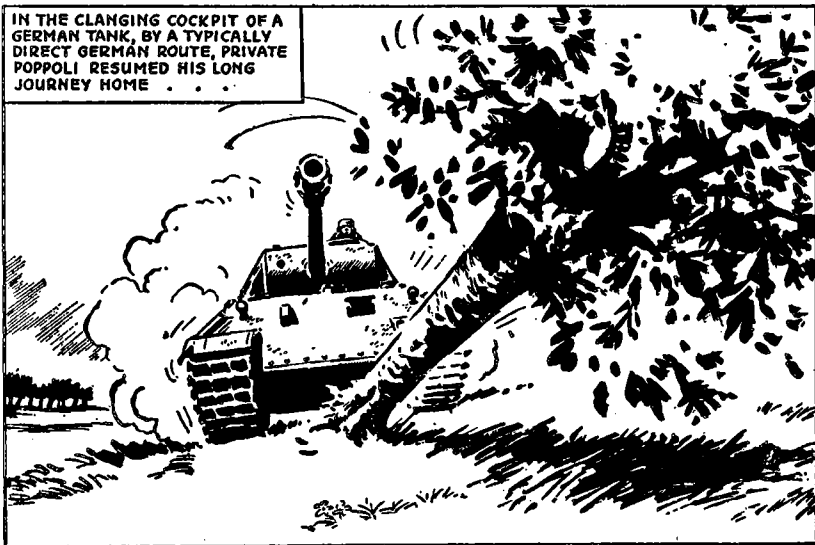


SIX FEET OF MILITARY MUSCLE
EXPANDED MENACINGLY OVER
THE LITTLE ITALIAN PRIVATE...

BUT, GENERAL...
I'M A NEUTRAL...
IT'S YOUR WAR, NOT
MINE... SURELY
YOU KNOW...

I KNOW THAT YOU
ARE A MISERABLE SHIRKER,
ITALIAN... LIKE ALL YOUR
COUNTRYMEN! TO ME, YOU
ARE A PRISONER WHO
EITHER OBEYS OR DIES!
WHICH IS IT TO BE,
EH?

IN THE CLANGING COCKPIT OF A
GERMAN TANK, BY A TYPICALLY
DIRECT GERMAN ROUTE, PRIVATE
POPPOLI RESUMED HIS LONG
JOURNEY HOME . . .



Chapter 2. BETWEEN TWO FIRES

AN HOUR LATER, THE TWO PANTHERS CLANKED INTO THE MAIN SQUARE OF CASTROVELLERI. IT WAS THROGGED WITH INFANTRY OF THE SIXTH PANZERS. MAJOR BERG SWUNG DOWN MASTERFULLY . . .

YOU SEE, ITALIAN? THE WEHRMACHT IS READY TO THROW THE BRITISH BACK INTO THE SEA. AND YOU WILL HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF ASSISTING US! LET US DRINK TO OUR PARTNERSHIP!

IF YOU INSIST, GENERAL . . .



AFTER HIS FOURTH GLASS OF CHIANTI, MAJOR BERG BECAME EXPANSIVE. EVEN THE TIMID PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD CEASED TO PERSPIRE . . .

I TELL YOU, POPPOLI, WAR IS A BUSINESS . . .

REALLY, GENERAL? BUT IT'S SUCH A JOLLY NOISY ONE . . .

HERR MAJOR . . . THE COLONEL ASKS FOR YOU . . .



IN FACT, SIPPING HIS CHIANTI IN THE SHADY WARMTH AFTER THE MAJOR HAD GONE, PRIVATE POPPOLI BEGAN TO FEEL QUITE PEACEFUL AGAIN . . .

WELL, I'M FIFTEEN MILES NEARER CASTELMONTE THAN I WAS THIS MORNING . . . BEING A PRISONER ISN'T SO BAD AFTER ALL. I THINK I'M GOING TO LIKE IT.

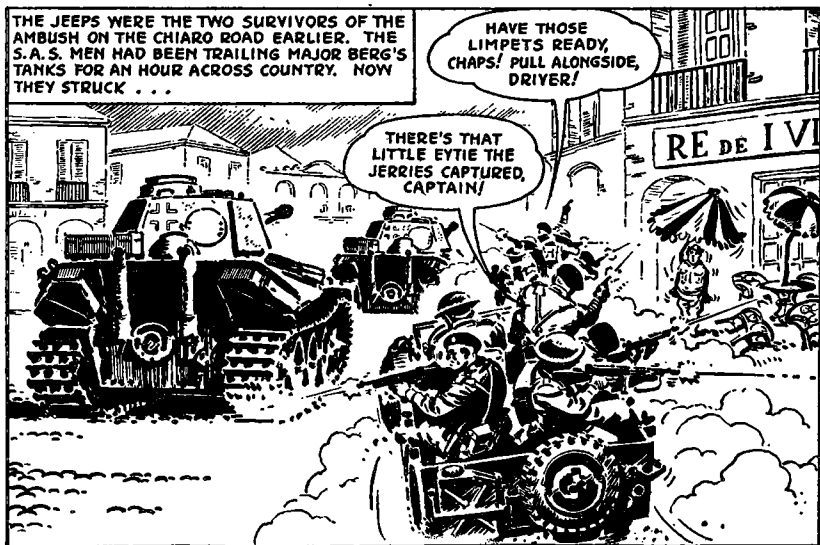
HUH?



SUDDENLY, TWO BRITISH JEEPS EXPLODED INTO THE MAIN SQUARE OF CASTROVELLERI AND A GERMAN SCHMEISSER TORE THE AIR APART TWO INCHES FROM PRIVATE POPPOLI'S EAR

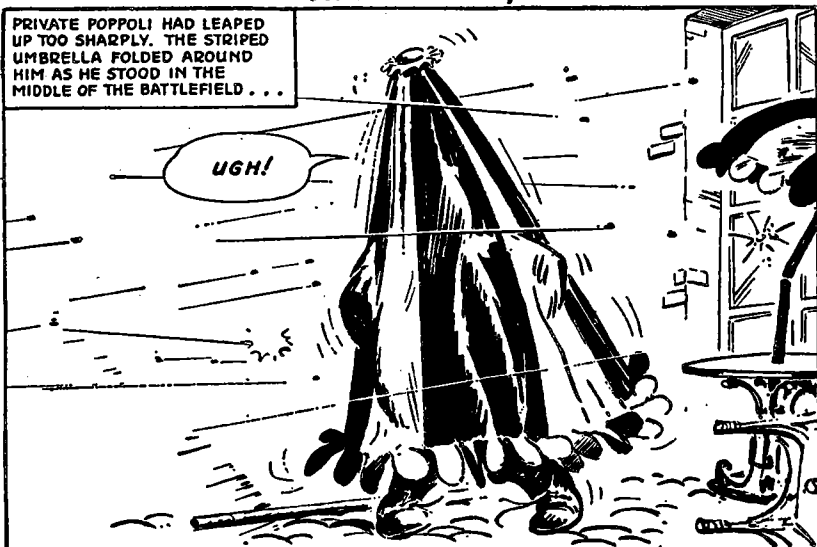


THE JEEPS WERE THE TWO SURVIVORS OF THE AMBUSH ON THE CHIARO ROAD EARLIER. THE S.A.S. MEN HAD BEEN TRAILING MAJOR BERG'S TANKS FOR AN HOUR ACROSS COUNTRY. NOW THEY STRUCK . . .



PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD LEAPED UP TOO SHARPLY. THE STRIPED UMBRELLA FOLDED AROUND HIM AS HE STOOD IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BATTLEFIELD . . .

UGH!

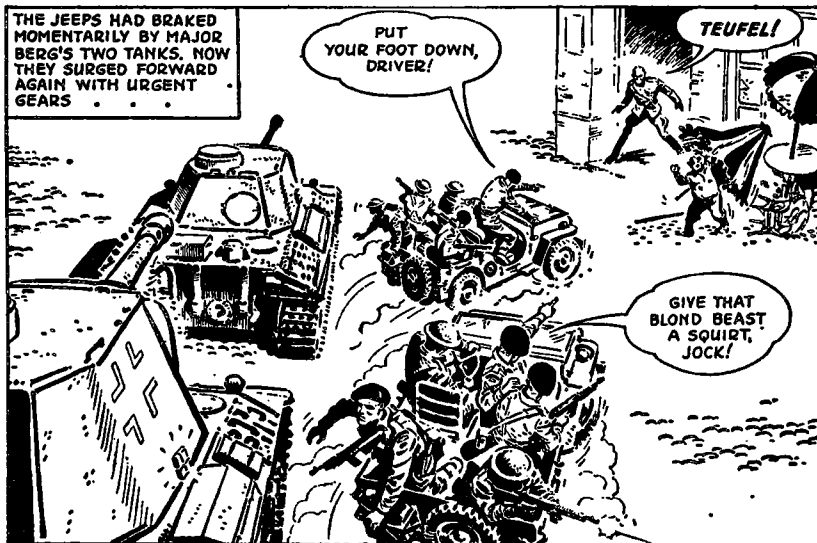


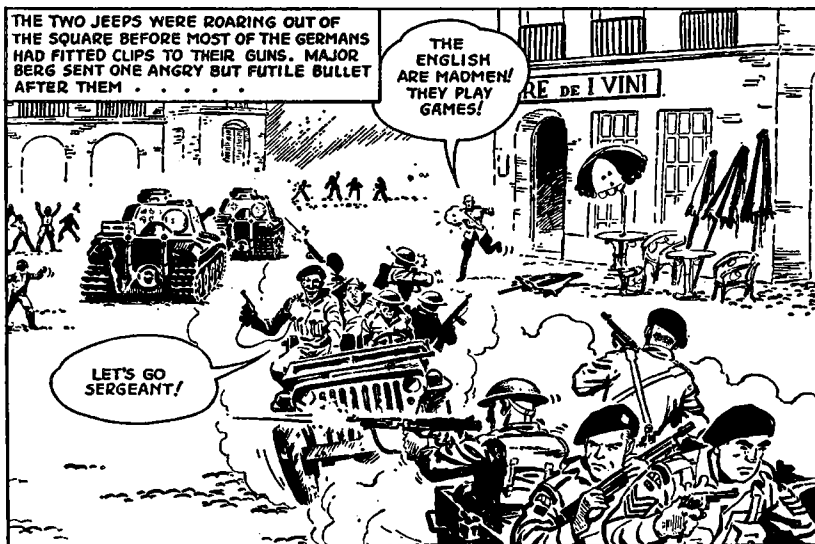
THE JEEPS HAD BRAKED MOMENTARILY BY MAJOR BERG'S TWO TANKS. NOW THEY SURGED FORWARD AGAIN WITH URGENT GEARS . . .

PUT
YOUR FOOT DOWN,
DRIVER!

TEUFEL!

GIVE THAT
BLOND BEAST
A SQUIRT,
JOCK!





DEAFENED, SHAKEN, BEWILDERED, PRIVATE POPPOLI UNSCREWED HIS EYES . . .

YOU ARE THE INGLESSE
THOSE GERMANSS SHELLED
ON THE ROAD . . . YOU
DIDN'T COME ALL THIS
WAY FOR ME, DID
YOU?

NO,
OLD CHAP
. . . NOT
EXACTLY . . .



CAPTAIN BASIL CHAMPNEY LOOKED BACK IN TIME
TO SEE HIS LIMPET BOMBS WRECK THE TWO
GERMAN TANKS. HIS MOUSTACHE TWITCHED
APPRECIATIVELY . . .

WE COULDN'T LET JERRY TAKE THE
FIRST ROUND AND GET AWAY WITH IT,
COULD WE, CHAPS?



SIX MILES BACK TOWARDS CHIARO, THE JEEPS
TURNED OFF THE ROAD AND BUMPED INTO A
ROCKY GULLY. THE REST OF CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY'S
SPECIAL AIR SERVICE UNIT WERE LEAGUERED
THERE . . .

WELL, GENERAL . . .
ARRIVEDERCI . . . I'M WALKING
HOME! IF YOU'LL
EXCUSE ME . . .



ON HIS FIRST DAY OF PEACE, PRIVATE POPPOLI WAS BEGINNING TO LEARN ABOUT WAR . . .

FUN? BUT WAR IS A BUSINESS, GENERAL . . .

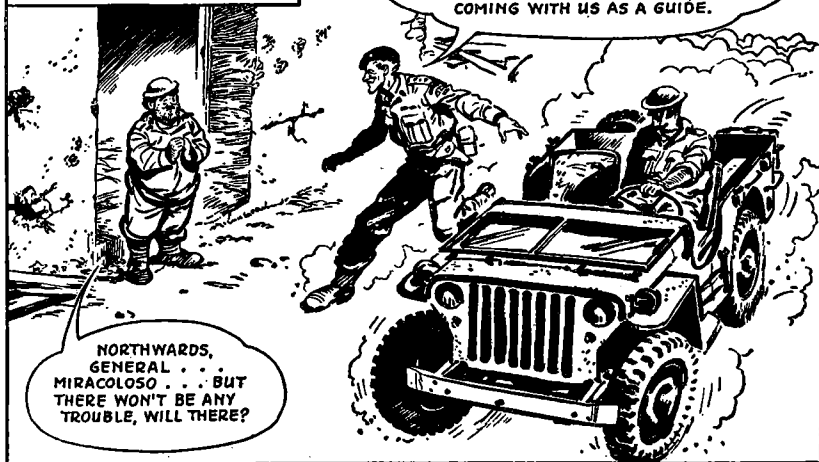


NONSENSE, OLD CHAP . . . WHAT PINHEAD TOLD YOU THAT? WAR IS A LARK . . . YOU HANG AROUND WITH US AND WE'LL SHOW YOU .



PRIVATE POPPOLI HUNG AROUND WITH THE S.A.S. UNIT. HE HAD NO CHOICE. ONE DAY, TWO WEEKS LATER . . .

AH, POPPOLI, OLD CHAP . . . SORRY WE'VE BEEN GIVING YOU SUCH A DULL TIME LATELY, BUT I'VE GOT NEWS FOR YOU. WE'RE MAKING A BIG PUSH NORTHWARDS AND YOU'RE COMING WITH US AS A GUIDE.



NORTHWARDS, GENERAL . . . MIRACOLOSO . . . BUT THERE WON'T BE ANY TROUBLE, WILL THERE?

CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY'S UNIT WAS QUARTERED IN A FARMHOUSE AT POTENZA. PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD BEEN GIVEN A HARMLESS JOB IN COMPANY HEADQUARTERS.



TROUBLE?
OF COURSE NOT, OLD CHAP!
IT'LL BE A PICNIC!

PICNIC . . .
AH! BUONO . . .
PICNICS ARE NICE
. . . I HOPE THE
WEATHER'S GOOD!

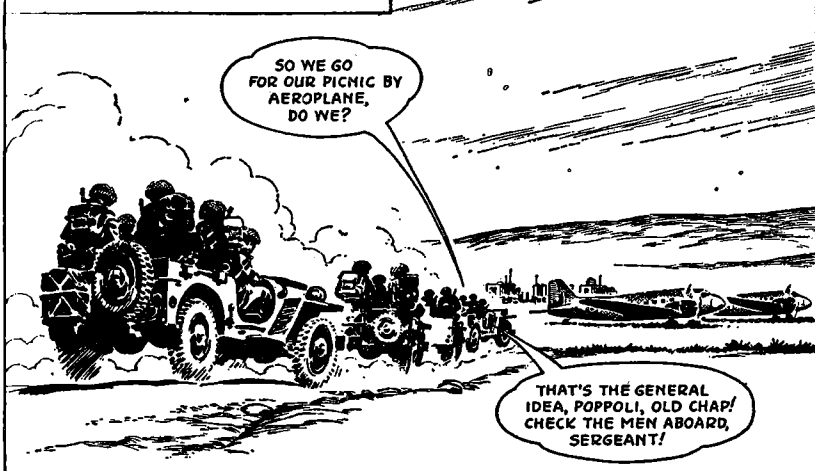
THE PROSPECT OF A MOVE NEARER TO HIS HOME TOWN AND A PLEASANT OUTING DELIGHTED THE LITTLE ITALIAN PRIVATE. NEXT DAY HE LINED UP WITH THE S.A.S MEN AND WAS GIVEN A BULKY PACK . . .



. . . AND
THE NEXT . . .

AH, A
CUSHION FOR
SITTING ON AT
THE PICNIC! THE
GROUND'S SURE
TO BE DAMP . . . HOW
THOUGHTFUL THE
ENGLISH ARE!

THE LOADED JEEP DROVE EAST OUT OF POTENZA AND TURNED ON TO THE BUMPY GRASS OF A R.A.F. ADVANCED AIRFIELD. TWO DAKOTAS WERE WARMING UP THERE . . .



SOMEONE HAD STRAPPED THE BULKY PACK TO PRIVATE POPPOLI'S BACK BEFORE HE BOARDED THE DAKOTA. IT MADE A REALLY COMFORTABLE CUSHION. HE WAS QUITE EXCITED . . .





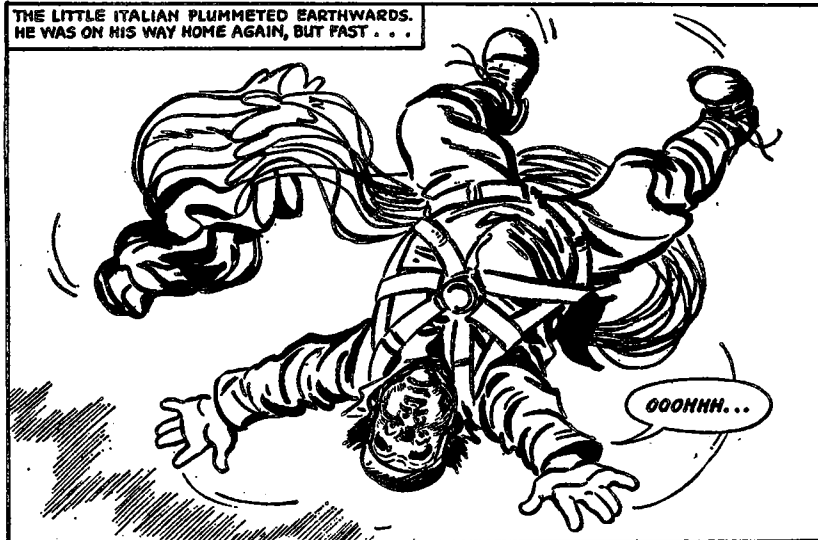
PRIVATE POPPOLI REACHED THE OPEN DOOR IN THE FUSELAGE. HE LOOKED OUT HE GROANED



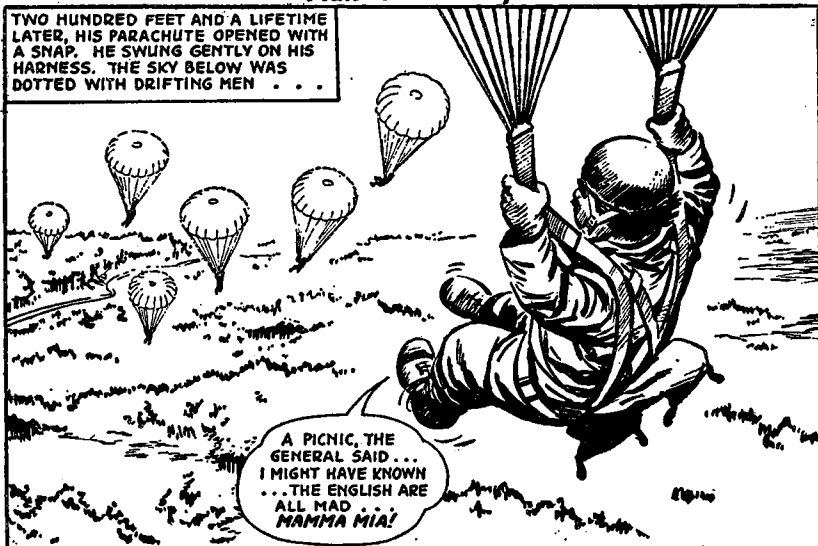
A LARGE HAND PROPELLED PRIVATE POPPOLI INTO TEN THOUSAND FEET OF STOMACH-LURCHING EMPTINESS



THE LITTLE ITALIAN PLUMMETED EARTHWARDS. HE WAS ON HIS WAY HOME AGAIN, BUT FAST . . .



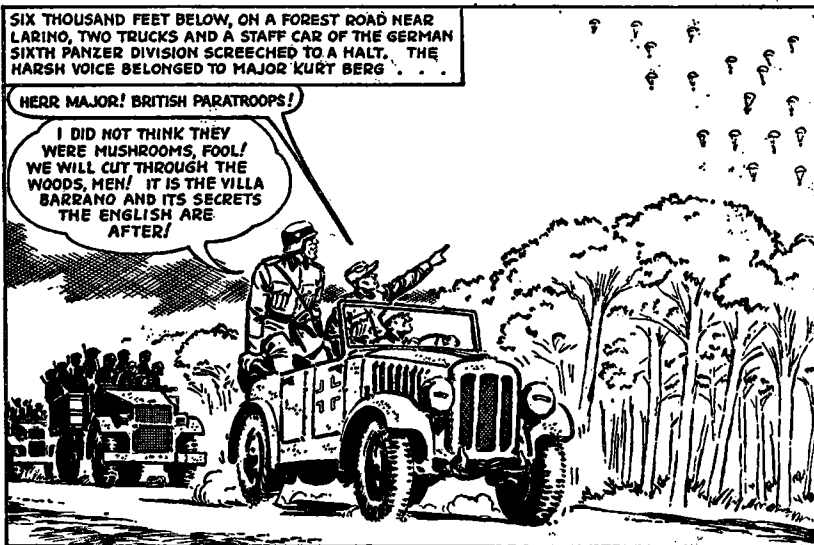
TWO HUNDRED FEET AND A LIFETIME LATER, HIS PARACHUTE OPENED WITH A SNAP. HE SWUNG GENTLY ON HIS HARNESS. THE SKY BELOW WAS DOTTED WITH DRIFTING MEN . . .



SIX THOUSAND FEET BELOW, ON A FOREST ROAD NEAR LARINO, TWO TRUCKS AND A STAFF CAR OF THE GERMAN SIXTH PANZER DIVISION SCREECHED TO A HALT. THE HARSH VOICE BELONGED TO MAJOR KURT BERG . . .

HERR MAJOR! BRITISH PARATROOPS!

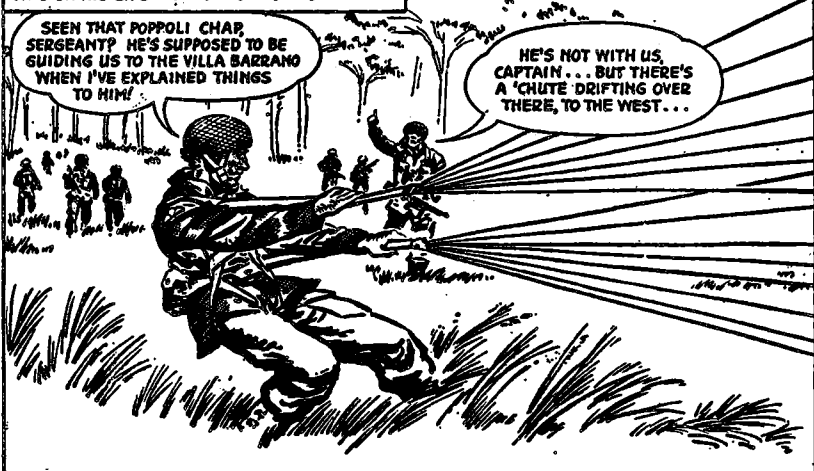
I DID NOT THINK THEY WERE MUSHROOMS, FOOL! WE WILL CUT THROUGH THE WOODS, MEN! IT IS THE VILLA BARRANO AND ITS SECRETS THE ENGLISH ARE AFTER!



MAJOR BERG WAS A SHREWD SOLDIER. WHEN CAPTAIN BASIL CHAMPNEY HIT THE LANDING ZONE THREE MINUTES LATER, THE SAME NAME WAS ON HIS LIPS

SEEN THAT POPPOLI CHAP, SERGEANT? HE'S SUPPOSED TO BE GUIDING US TO THE VILLA BARRANO WHEN I'VE EXPLAINED THINGS TO HIM!

HE'S NOT WITH US, CAPTAIN... BUT THERE'S A 'CHUTE DRIFTING OVER THERE, TO THE WEST...



THE PARACHUTE DRIFTING TO THE WEST WAS PRIVATE POPPOLI'S. A FLUKE OF WIND HAD CARRIED HIM AWAY FROM THE LANDING ZONE. THE TREES WERE SWINGING UP TO MEET HIM WITH ALARMING SPEED

IF THIS IS PEACE, GIVE ME WAR ANY DAY... HELP...



THE BRANCHES OF A TALL PINE SHOOK THE CHUTE-RISERS OF THE LITTLE ITALIAN. HE HAD CLOSED HIS EYES AS THE TREES RUSHED UP TO MEET HIM. THE JOLT KNOCKED ALL THE WIND OUT OF HIM

OOOFFFF...



HALF A MILE TO THE EAST, CAPTAIN BASIL CHAMPNEY LED HIS MEN INTO THE TREES. FOR THOSE VETERANS OF THE SPECIAL AIR SERVICE, A DROP OVER ENEMY TERRITORY WAS ROUTINE . . .



HALF A MILE TO THE WEST, MAJOR KURT BERG, TOO, LED HIS MEN INTO THE TREES. FOR THESE VETERAN PANZER TROOPS, THE REPULSE OF AN ENEMY LANDING FROM THE AIR WAS ALSO ROUTINE . . .



Chapter 3.

The PICNIC

PRIVATE POPPOLI WAS HANGING HELPLESSLY BY HIS HARNESS FROM A TREE. THE TWO FORCES MET TEN FEET BELOW HIM WITH A HARSH CHATTER OF TOMMY GUNS AND SCHEISSERS . . .



MAJOR BERG FOUND COVER AND DREW A DEEP BREATH. THEN HE GLANCED UPWARDS, HIS EYES GLITTERED . . .



ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CLEARING, SERGEANT LOGG EASED HIS CRAMPED TRIGGER FINGER AND LOOKED UPWARDS.

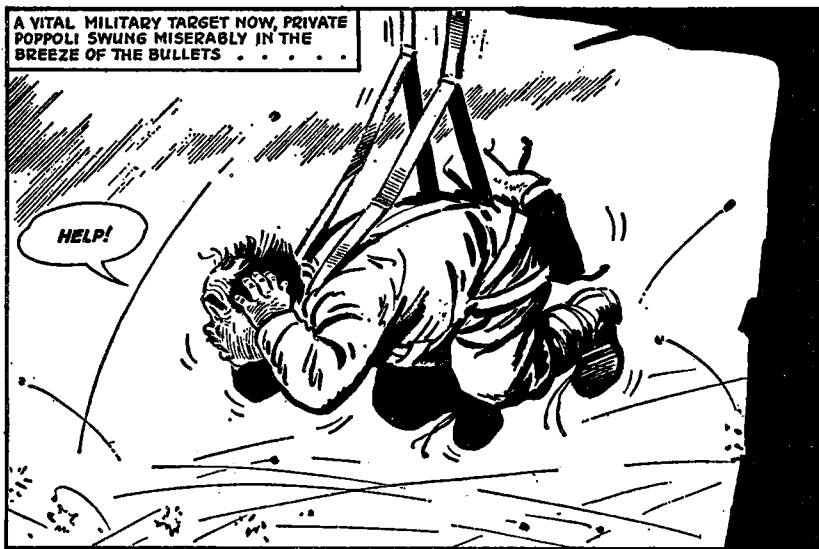
CAPTAIN...
LOOK...
UP THERE!

WELL, WELL...PRIVATE POPPOLI/
SERGEANT, I THINK IT'S TIME YOU TOOK
A SECTION AND WORKED ROUND THE
BACK OF THOSE JERRIES...WE'VE
GOT TO GRAB THAT LITTLE MAN
BEFORE THEY DO!



A VITAL MILITARY TARGET NOW, PRIVATE
POPPOLI SWUNG MISERABLY IN THE
BREEZE OF THE BULLETS

HELP!



IT WAS SERGEANT LOGG'S FLANKING MOVEMENT WHICH BROKE THE DEADLOCK. THREATENED ON TWO SIDES, MAJOR BERG GAVE A HARSH ORDER:

ON THE FLANK, CAPTAIN!

COME ON, MEN... ONE OF YOU GET POOR OLD POPPOLI DOWN...

RETREAT!



LUCKILY FOR MAJOR BERG, FRESH TROOPS HAD ALREADY HURRIED TOWARDS THE SOUND OF THE FIRING. THEY INCLUDED A MORTAR CREW.

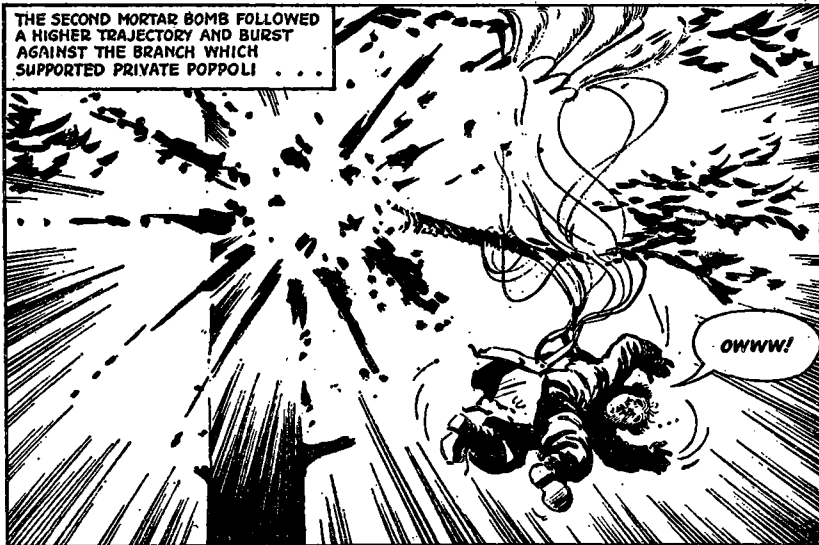
GOOD! SET UP YOUR MORTAR HERE... RANGE TWO HUNDRED... RAPID FIRE! NOW WE WILL FLUSH OUT THE CURSED ENGLANDERS!



THE FIRST MORTAR BOMB EXPLODED AT THE FOOT OF THE PINE TREE. CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY WAS A DARING SOLDIER, BUT NOT A FOOLHARDY ONE . . .



THE SECOND MORTAR BOMB FOLLOWED A HIGHER TRAJECTORY AND BURST AGAINST THE BRANCH WHICH SUPPORTED PRIVATE POPPOLI . . .



SO PRIVATE POPPOLI FELL INTO THE HANDS OF THE GERMANS, LITERALLY, A SECOND TIME . . .

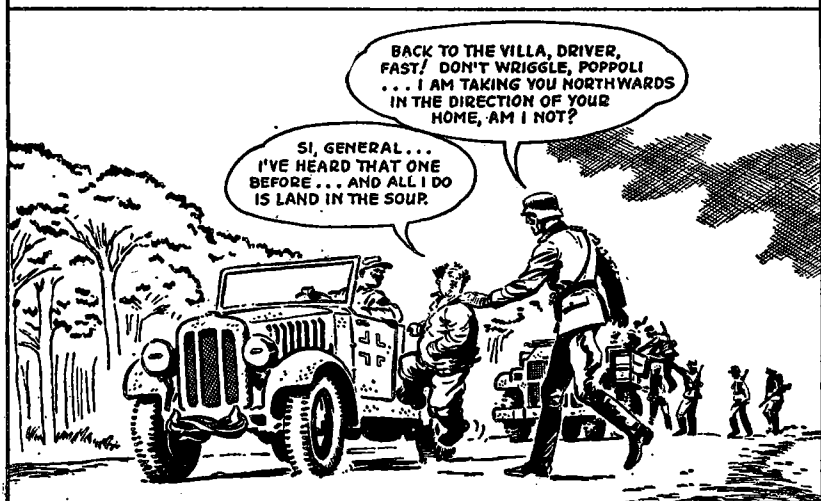


THE SMOOTH VOICE OF MAJOR BERG GRATED IN PRIVATE POPPOLI'S BUZZING EARS.



Man Of Destiny

MAJOR BERG WAS IN A HURRY. LEAVING HALF HIS MEN TO HUNT DOWN THE BRITISH RAIDERS, HE HUSTLED POPPOLI INTO THE STAFF CAR . . .



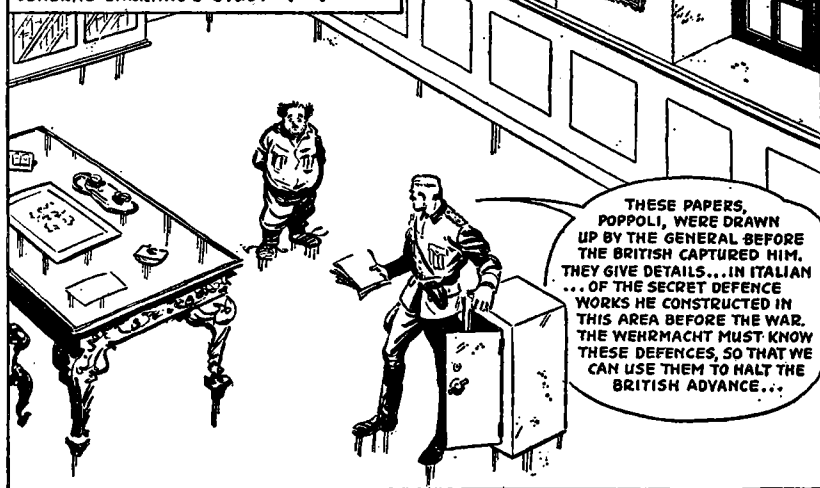
THE TRUCK AND THE STAFF CAR GATHERED SPEED. FROM THE TREES WHICH BORDERED THE ROAD, SHARP EYES WATCHED THEM. . .



AFTER A THIRTY MINUTE RUN, THE STAFF CAR PURRURED ON TO A GRAVEL DRIVE. PRIVATE POPPOLI OPENED HIS EYES WIDE...



MAJOR BERG TOOK THE LITTLE ITALIAN INTO A BIG ROOM ON THE GROUND FLOOR, ONCE GENERAL BARRANO'S STUDY



Man Of Destiny

PRIVATE POPPOLI SHUFFLED THE PAPERS TOGETHER WITH THE NEAT HANDS OF A BORN CLERK . . .

THE HERR GENERAL VISITS THE VILLA TO INSPECT THE PAPERS TOMORROW, POPPOLI. THANKS TO YOU, I SHALL HAVE A FULL TRANSLATION READY FOR HIM WHEN HE ARRIVES.
JA?

I SEE, GENERAL... A TRANSLATION... I SUPPOSE THAT'S BETTER THAN JUMPING OUT OF AEROPLANES...



PRIVATE POPPOLI WORKED THROUGH THE NIGHT. WITH A PEN IN HIS HAND AND THE PAPERS RUSTLING UNDER HIS FINGERS, A DEEP CONTENTMENT STOLE OVER HIM. THIS WAS LIKE HIS OWN PEACEFUL WAR ALL OVER AGAIN . . .

ONLY THREE MORE PAGES... WHAT A PITY! I HAVEN'T ENJOYED MYSELF SO MUCH SINCE I LEFT THE BARRACKS AT CHIARO.

WHAT WAS THAT?



A HAND SWUNG UP ABOVE THE SILL OF THE OPEN WINDOW. THE GRENADE LANDED WITH A HEART-STOPPING THUMP ON THE PAPERS IN FRONT OF PRIVATE POPPOLI.



PRIVATE POPPOLI JUST GOGGLED AT THE GRENADE. IT WAS THE GERMAN GUARD WHO SWIPED IT OFF THE DESK. FOR A GERMAN, HE THOUGHT QUICKLY . . .



ON SHAKY LEGS, PRIVATE POPPOLI SCUTTLED ACROSS TO THE METAL SAFE. HE BUNDLED AN ARMFUL OF PAPERS INSIDE. THE GERMAN BROUGHT THE REST . . .



MAMMA MIA!
I KNEW IT WAS
TOO PEACEFUL!

SUDDENLY, THE GRENADE WENT OFF WITH A DEAFENING ROAR. PRIVATE POPPOLI JOINED THE PAPERS IN THE METAL SAFE...



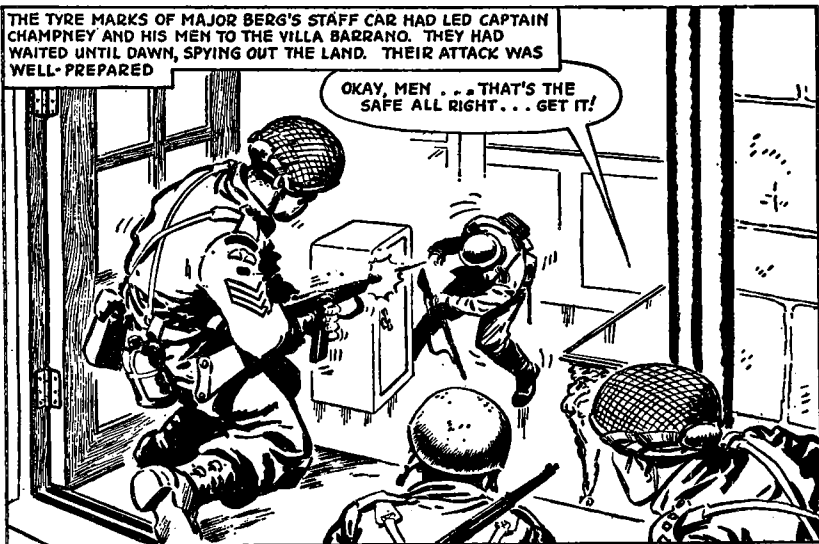
OWWWW!

THE WINDOW DARKENED SUDDENLY. THE GERMAN WHIPPED ROUND, SLAMMING THE DOOR OF THE SAFE ON PRIVATE POPPOLI. HIS RIFLE BARKED . . .



THE TYRE MARKS OF MAJOR BERG'S STAFF CAR HAD LED CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY AND HIS MEN TO THE VILLA BARRANO. THEY HAD WAITED UNTIL DAWN, SPYING OUT THE LAND. THEIR ATTACK WAS WELL-PREPARED

OKAY, MEN . . . THAT'S THE SAFE ALL RIGHT . . . GET IT!



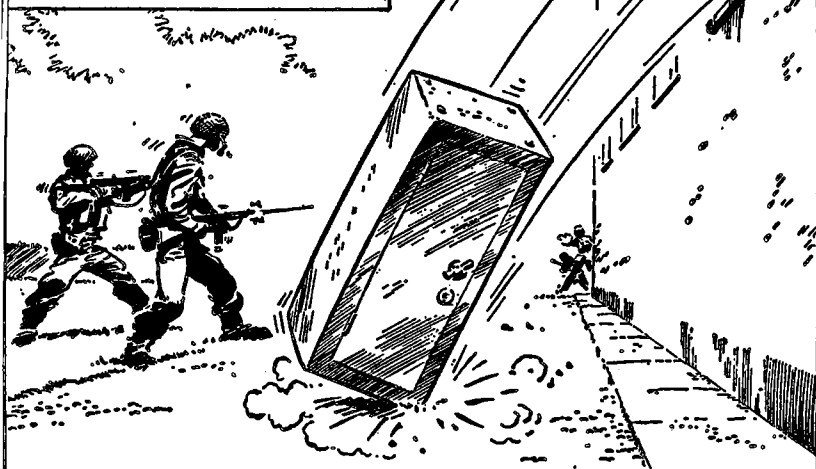
PRIVATE POPPOLI WAS RESUMING HIS UNCOMFORTABLE JOURNEY HOME . . .



THE SAFE WAS MANHANDLED ON TO THE WINDOW SILL . . . JUST AS A GROUP OF GERMAN PANZER TROOPS APPEARED ROUND THE CORNER OF THE HOUSE . . .



THE SAFE HIT THE GROUND WITH A BONE-SHAKING THUD. THE MUFFLED SOUND WHICH CAME FROM INSIDE IT WAS DROWNED BY THE HAMMERING TOMMY GUNS . . .

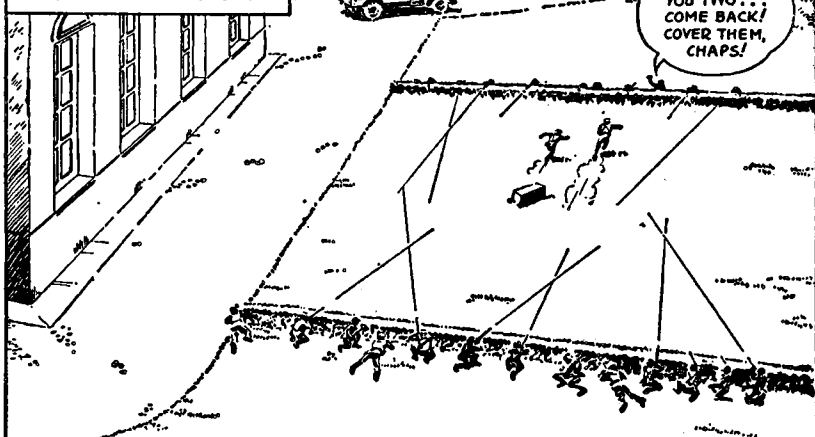


MAJOR BERG JOINED HIS MEN, AS THE TWO BRITISH SOLDIERS WERE STAGGERING ACROSS THE LAWN WITH THE SAFE. HE HOWLED WITH RAGE . . .

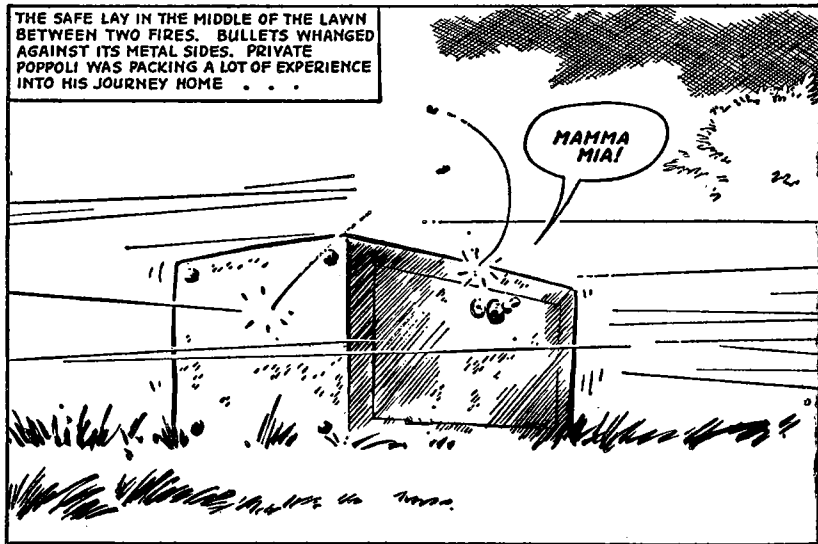
YOU LET THE ENGLANDER MADMEN STEAL MY PAPERS FROM UNDER MY NOSE. WIPE THEM OUT, YOU FOOLS!



SPURRED ON BY THE MAJOR, THE GERMANS ADVANCED AS FAR AS THE LOW HEDGE ON ONE SIDE OF THE LAWN. THE BRITISH FELL BACK TO THE LOW HEDGE ON THE OTHER SIDE . . .



THE SAFE LAY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE LAWN BETWEEN TWO FIRES. BULLETS WHANGED AGAINST ITS METAL SIDES. PRIVATE POPPOLI WAS PACKING A LOT OF EXPERIENCE INTO HIS JOURNEY HOME . . .



A FLANK ATTACK DIVIDED THE ATTENTION OF THE S.A.S. MEN. MAJOR BERG LEAPED HOARSELY TO HIS FEET . . .

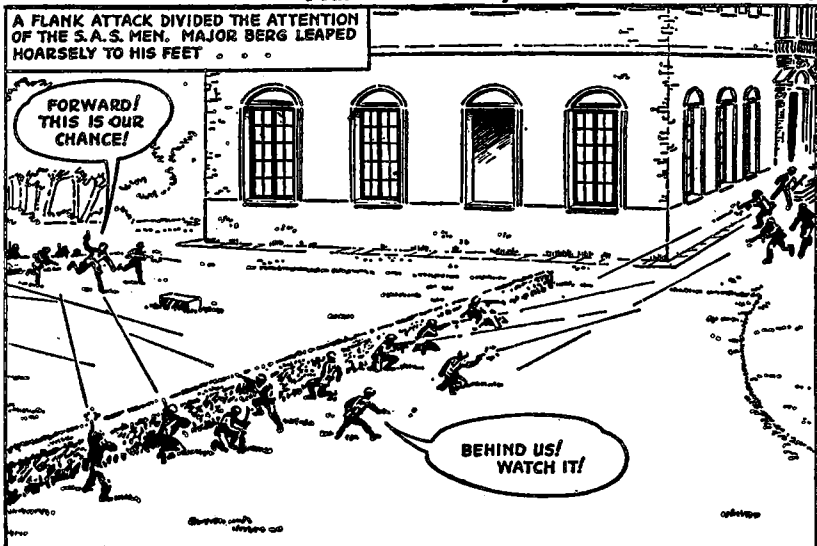
FORWARD!
THIS IS OUR
CHANCE!

BEHIND US!
WATCH IT!

THE GERMANS HAD REACHED THE SAFE BY THE TIME SERGEANT LOGG'S SECTION HAD DEALT WITH THE FLANK ATTACK. CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY RALLIED HIS MEN . . .

DON'T LET THEM
GET AWAY WITH IT, CHAPS
. . . FOLLOW ME!

O-OOUF!



THE GERMANS FELL BACK BEFORE THE FRESH HAIL OF LEAD. THE SAFE DROPPED WITH A CLANG AGAIN . . .

TALLY-HO, CHAPS!

ACH,
THE MAD
ENGLANDER!



THIS TIME, THE S.A.S. MEN TOOK A FIRM GRIP ON THE SAFE. IT NEEDED FOUR MEN TO CARRY IT, BUT THEY GOT IT TO THEIR SIDE OF THE LAWN. SERGEANT LOGG SHOUTED EAGERLY . . .

SIR . . . THERE'S
A TRUCK PARKED ON
THE DRIVE BEHIND
US!

THE
VERY THING,
SERGEANT . . .
CARRY ON WHILE
I DISCOURAGE
THE JERRIES.



THE GERMANS WERE DISCOURAGED. WHILE THEY HUGGED THE FLIMSY COVER OF THEIR HEDGE, THE SAFE WAS CARTED ACROSS TO THE TRUCK . . .



THE SAFE DROPPED WITH A CLANG IN THE BACK OF THE TRUCK. THE S.A.S. MEN FOLLOWED IT AS THE ENGINE COUGHED AND ROARED.



THE TRUCK LEAPED FORWARD. IT SHAVED A SLEEK GERMAN STAFF CAR ON ITS FURIOUS JOURNEY DOWN THE DRIVE. MAJOR BERG LOOKED AT THAT STAFF CAR AND GROANED.



ABOVE THE LAST HECTIC CLATTER OF A TOMMY GUN, AS THE TRUCK LURCHED OUT THROUGH THE GATES OF THE VILLA BARRANO, CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY SIGHED



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, THE TRUCK WAS WELL CLEAR OF PURSUIT IN THE SILENT FOREST . . .

WELL, WE GOT THE PAPERS, CAPTAIN... THE R.A.F BOYS WILL BE ABLE TO PLASTER THOSE SECRET DEFENCES BEFORE THE JERRIES CAN FIND AND USE THEM.

TOO TRUE, SERGEANT! WE MIGHT AS WELL OPEN UP THE SAFE NOW, NO NEED TO CART IT AROUND WITH US ... WE ONLY WANT WHAT'S INSIDE.

THEY OPENED THE SAFE. THE LITTLE MAN INSIDE IT SAID JUST SIX WORDS, BUT THEY CAME FROM THE BOTTOM OF HIS HEART . . .

PLEASE CAN I GO HOME NOW?

Man Of Destiny

THEY PRISED POPPOLI OUT OF THE SAFE. THEY BRUSHED HIM DOWN AND CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY SHOOK HIS HEAD SYMPATHETICALLY . . .

WE KNOW HOW YOU FEEL, POPPOLI OLD CHAP... IT'S ROTTEN LUCK! BUT THERE'S A JERRY ARMY BETWEEN YOU AND CASTELMONTE AND WE'LL HAVE TO CLEAR IT OUT OF THE WAY FIRST . . . YOU JUST STICK AROUND WITH US AND WE'LL GET YOU HOME,

SI, GENERAL . . . I SUPPOSE YOU'RE RIGHT . . . BUT I WISH YOU'D HURRY UP AND FINISH YOUR WAR . . .

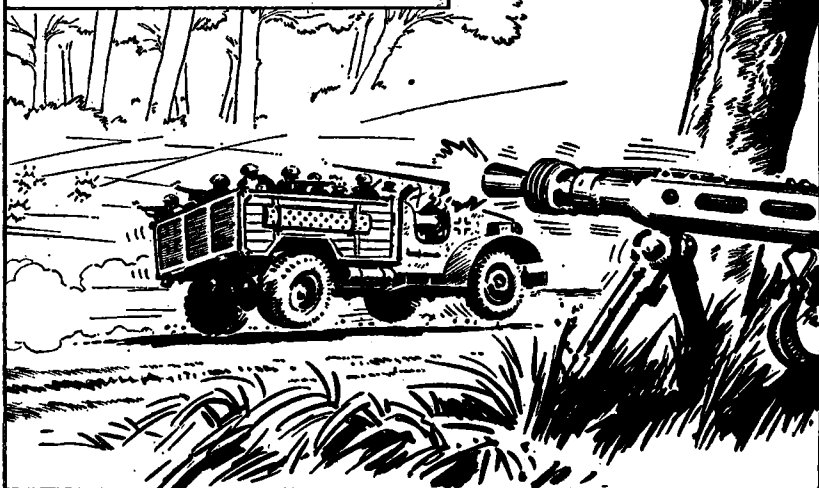
THE STOLEN TRUCK ROARED ON TOWARDS THE BRITISH LINES. THE SUN WAS BRIGHT. FOR QUITE A LONG WHILE, PRIVATE POPPOLI FELT ALMOST PEACEFUL.

COR . . . THE LITTLE GEEZER'S A GLUTTON FOR PUNISHMENT, ISN'T HE?

YEAH . . . BUT HE LOOKS PRETTY PEACEFUL NOW!

NO, NO! DO NOT SAY THAT! SOMETHING IS SURE TO HAPPEN!

SOMETHING HAPPENED. THE TRUCK HAD REACHED THE GERMAN FRONT LINE. IT PUNCHED THROUGH AT TOP SPEED UNDER A HAIL OF LEAD . . .



IN THE BACK OF THE TRUCK, PRIVATE POPPOLI TUCKED HIS HEAD DOWN BETWEEN HIS SHOULDERS AND SIGHED DEEPLY . . .



Chapter 4 **HOME, SWEET HOME!**

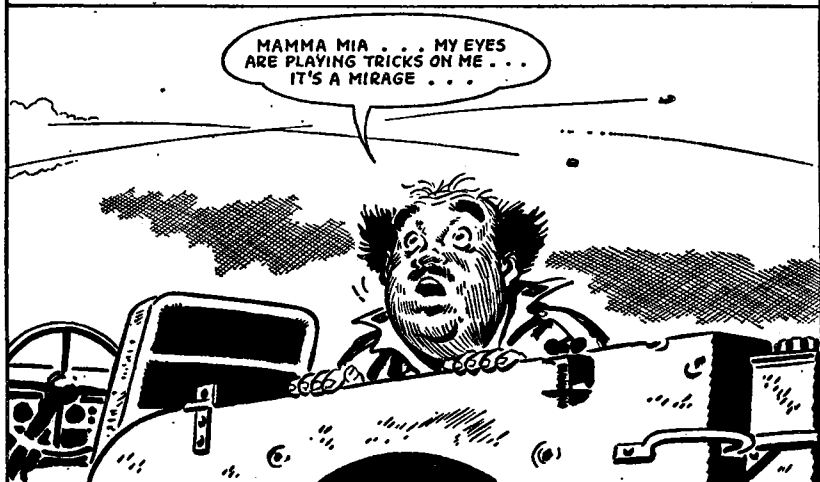
SIX MONTHS LATER, THE BULLETS WERE STILL WHINING ABOVE PRIVATE POPPOLI'S HEAD. IT WAS MAY, 1944, AND THE BATTLEFIELD HAD SHIFTED NORTHWARD TO THE ABRUZZI, BUT THE BULLETS WERE JUST AS NOISY . . .



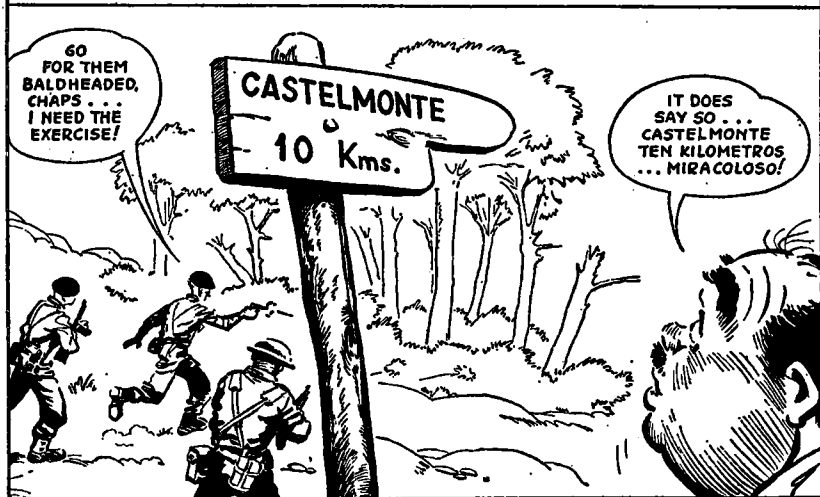
THE EIGHTH ARMY HAD SLOGGED UP TO THE GUSTAV LINE BY THE WINTER OF 1943. THERE THEY HAD STAYED FOR FIVE MONTHS, BOGGED DOWN BY THE WEATHER AND THE GERMANS. PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD BEEN BOGGED DOWN WITH THEM.



ALL WINTER, THE LITTLE ITALIAN HAD WAITED IMPATIENTLY, SEPARATED FROM HIS HOME TOWN OF CASTELMONTE ONLY BY SIXTY MILES AND A HEDGE OF GERMAN STEEL. THEN, THE EIGHTH ARMY HAD LUNGED FORWARD AGAIN . . .



BUT IT WAS NOT A MIRAGE THAT PRIVATE POPPOLI SAW ON THAT MORNING IN MAY. IT WAS A SIGNPOST . . .



STRAY BULLETS STILL RANG OVER THE LITTLE ITALIAN'S HEAD. HE IGNORED THEM NOW. AFTER EIGHT HARROWING MONTHS AND THREE HUNDRED TERRIBLE MILES, PRIVATE POPPOLI WAS NEARING HOME.



CAPTAIN BASIL CHAMPNEY AND HIS SPECIAL AIR SERVICE UNIT WERE ACTING AS ADVANCED INFANTRY AGAIN. THEY CLEARED OUT THE GERMAN SPANDAU NEST WITHOUT MUCH DIFFICULTY. WHEN THEY GOT BACK TO THE ROAD AGAIN ...



THE JEEP CAUGHT UP WITH PRIVATE POPPOLI TWO HUNDRED YARDS ALONG THE ROAD. HE LOOKED UP, BUT HE DID NOT STOP WALKING...

POPPOLI, OLD CHAP, WHERE ARE YOU GOING?

HOME, GENERAL... CASTELMONTE, TEN KILOMETROS...



THE SMILE UNDER CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY'S MOUSTACHE WAS A KINDLY ONE . . .

GOOD FOR YOU, OLD CHAP! I SUPPOSE I CAN'T PERSUADE YOU TO STAY WITH US AND HAVE SOME FUN . . . NO? I THOUGHT NOT! BUT YOU MIGHT AS WELL HOP ABOARD . . . WE'LL MAKE A DETOUR AND RUN YOU UP TO YOUR OLD HOME TOWN.

GRAZIE, GENERAL, GRAZIE!



PRIVATE POPPOLI STOOD UP EXCITEDLY IN THE JEEP AS IT CLIMBED THE ROAD TO THE LITTLE TOWN . . .

THINK OF THOSE MARRIAGE LICENCES WAITING FOR ME, GENERAL . . . AND THOSE BIRTH CERTIFICATES. WON'T THEY BE GLAD TO SEE ME IN CASTELMONTE!



IT WAS MARKET DAY IN CASTELMONTE, BUT BUSINESS WAS SLACK. ONE REASON FOR THIS WAS THE PRESENCE OF THREE LARGE ARMY TRUCKS AND A STAFF CAR IN THE MARKET SQUARE.



THE TRUCKS AND THE STAFF CAR BELONGED TO THE WEHRMACHT. THE HARSH VOICE OF THE OFFICER BELONGED TO OBERLEUTNANT KURT BERG . . .



THE BURLY GERMAN HAD BEEN REDUCED IN RANK AFTER THE AFFAIR AT THE VILLA BARRANO. IT HAD NOT IMPROVED HIS TEMPER. THE PEOPLE OF CASTELMONTE HEARD HIS ANNOUNCEMENT WITH DELIGHT.

MIRACOLOSO!
YOU HEAR ... THE TEDESCHI
ARE LEAVING CASTELMONTE!
THERE WILL BE NO
FIGHTING HERE!



A GERMAN SOLDIER HAD BEEN POSTED AS A LOOKOUT AT THE SOUTHERN END OF THE TOWN ...

THE ENGLANDERS,
HERR OBERLEUTNANT ...
MANY JEEPS! UP THE HILL
FROM THE SOUTH THEY COME,
TOWARDS CASTELMONTE.

SO ...



OBERLEUTNANT BERG SMILED HARSHLY. HE HAD AN OLD SCORE TO SETTLE WITH THE BRITISH, AND HE LIKED AMBUSHES.

WE WILL STAY A
LITTLE, MEN . . . LONG
ENOUGH TO WELCOME THE ENGLANDERS!
HIDE THE TRUCKS ROUND THE CORNER!
SAFETY CATCHES OFF!
RAPID FIRE WHEN I GIVE
THE WORD!

DOLOROSO . . .
CASTELMONTE WILL BE
A BATTLEFIELD!

THE TOWNSFOLK SCATTERED FEARFULLY AS THE ROAR OF ENGINES SWELLED FROM THE SOUTH. THE GERMANS WERE ALREADY HIDDEN . . .

THE ENGLISH
COME . . . WHY COULD
THEY NOT LEAVE US
ALONE?

THE TEDESCHI WOULD HAVE
GONE IN PEACE IF THEY HAD
NOT COME POKING THEIR
NOSES IN!

IT WAS A DESERTED CASTELMONTE WHICH PRIVATE POPPOLI RETURNED TO IN TRIUMPH AFTER HIS SERVICE IN THE WARS.

ATTENZIONE, AMICI !
WHERE ARE YOU? IT IS I, POPPOLI!
YOUR TOWN CLERK IS BACK
TO PUT YOUR AFFAIRS IN
ORDER!



THE JEEPS PULLED UP IN THE DESERTED SQUARE. PRIVATE POPPOLI CLIMBED DOWN. HE STOOD STILL FOR A LONG HAPPY MOMENT. HIS JOURNEY WAS OVER . . .

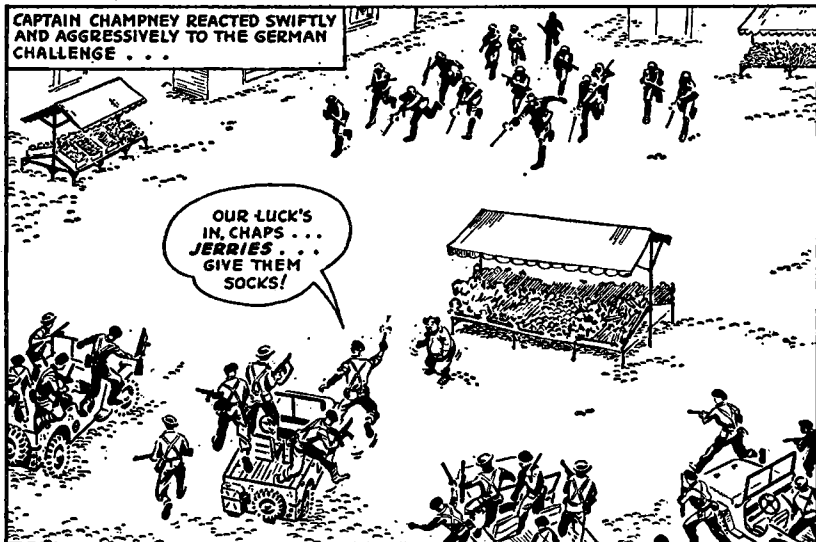
AH . . .
THIS IS CASTELMONTE,
GENERAL! LISTEN TO THE
SILENCE . . . THE QUIETNESS
. . . THE PEACEFULNESS!



IT WAS THEN THAT OBERLEUTNANT KURT BERG SPRANG HIS TRAP... AND THE MARKET SQUARE OF CASTELMONTE EXPLODED IN PRIVATE POPPOLI'S FACE.



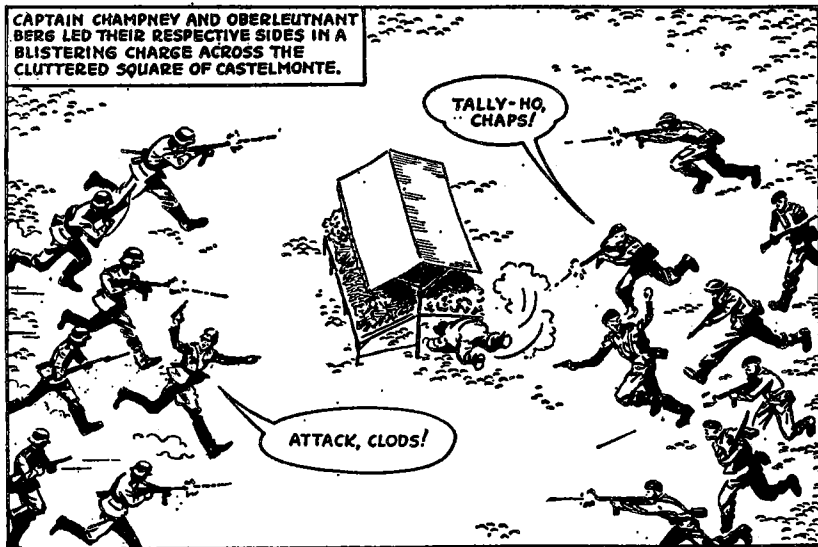
CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY REACTED SWIFTLY AND AGGRESSIVELY TO THE GERMAN CHALLENGE...



PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD TURNED AWAY FROM THE GERMAN ONSLAUGHT. HE WAS JUST IN TIME TO FACE THE FIRST WITHERING BURST OF BRITISH FIRE...

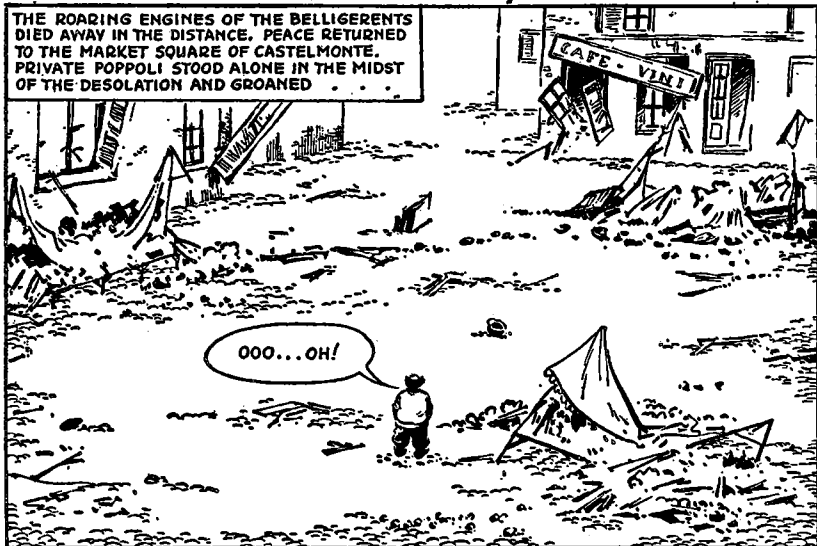


CAPTAIN CHAMPNEY AND OBERLEUTNANT BERG LED THEIR RESPECTIVE SIDES IN A BLISTERING CHARGE ACROSS THE CLUTTERED SQUARE OF CASTELMONTE.

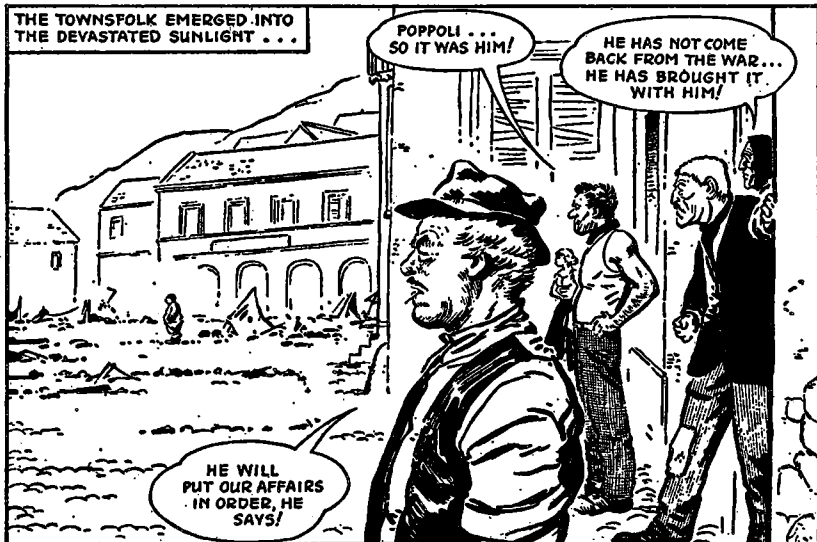


Man Of Destiny

THE ROARING ENGINES OF THE BELLIGERENTS DIED AWAY IN THE DISTANCE. PEACE RETURNED TO THE MARKET SQUARE OF CASTELMONTE. PRIVATE POPPOLI STOOD ALONE IN THE MIDST OF THE DESOLATION AND GROANED . . .



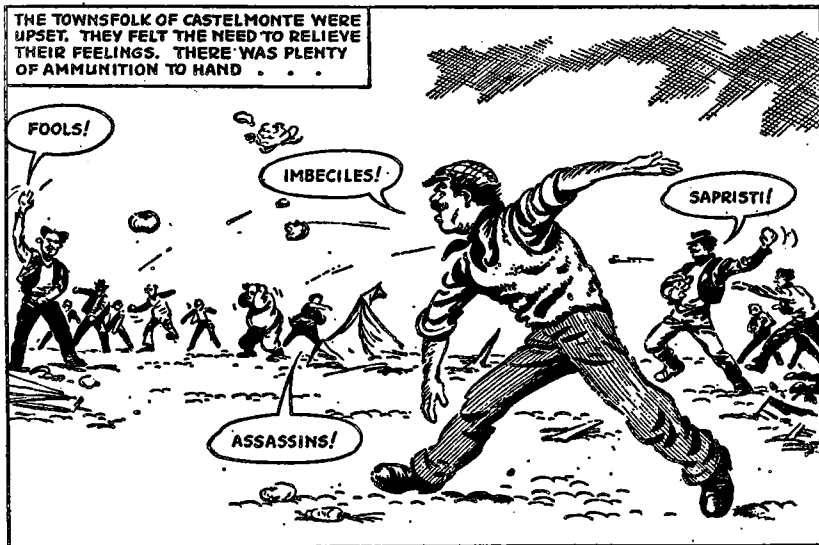
THE TOWNSFOLK EMERGED INTO THE DEVASTATED SUNLIGHT . . .



SOME VOICES WERE RAISED IN
PRIVATE POPPOLI'S DEFENCE . . .



THE TOWNSFOLK OF CASTELMONTE WERE
UPSET. THEY FELT THE NEED TO RELIEVE
THEIR FEELINGS. THERE WAS PLENTY
OF AMMUNITION TO HAND . . .



Man Of Destiny

PRIVATE POPPOLI HAD SAID NOTHING ALL THIS WHILE. WHEN THE VEGETABLES BEGAN TO FLY, HE TUCKED HIS HEAD INTO HIS SHOULDERS WITH AN EASE BORN OF LONG PRACTICE. HE SIGHED DEEPLY . . .



AFTER THREE HUNDRED MILES AND A LOAD OF TROUBLES, PRIVATE POPPOLI WAS HOME . . .



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